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Sanity held hostage

THE four-day-old ordeal of TWA Flight 847 is a wrenching reminder of how easy it is for life on this planet to suddenly turn mad.

What started Friday as a routine flight from Athens to Rome for 145 passengers and eight crew members — mostly Americans — has come to a deadly standoff in Beirut, with 30 lives hanging in the balance. What to do is a question without answers — or answers like those we used to get from the fortune-telling 8-ball toya that often answered our questions with: "Reply hazy, try again."

So far, the Reagan administration has handled this vexing situation correctly. It has monitored the situation, talked a bit tough, and has let the diplomats go about the job of finding a way for everyone to save face while saving lives.

More of the same is in order. The temptation to do otherwise must be avoided. It would be tempting, and perhaps justified, for the U.S. to mount an Entebbe-style raid to free the hostages, or to punish the hijackers. However, Beirut is a maze with no exit except trouble. Even with a scorecard, knowing who is playing on which team is problematical. The confusion is compounded by the fact that the Shiites thrive on martyrdom and an immediate military retaliation is pointless.

When the crisis is over, the usefulness of retaliation is still doubtful. First there is the question of assigning responsibility for what happened. It is crucial, but not always possible, that we are correct in determining who is at fault. Thus far, however, one bloody

hand of the Islamic *jihad* said to be responsible, doesn't know what the other hand is doing. Even if we could correctly assign responsibility, carrying out retaliatory measures in the Mideast sounds easier to do than it is, as witnessed by the CIA's recent botched attempt at political assassination of a Shiite leader.

What we can and must do is persuade Israel to release the 700 Lebanese Shiite prisoners it now holds. If the Israelis need a face-saving way to do this, it can turn the prisoners over to the Red Cross rather than to the Amal. For its part, the U.S. should worry less about saving face and setting precedents for dealing with terrorists and more about securing the hostages' freedom.

We must also begin to be serious about airline security abroad. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, when every other plane leaving Miami seemed to end up in Havanna, the U.S. did not hesitate to post sky marshals on each flight. This practice must be resumed on all flights to and from the Mediterranean basin.

In as far as possible, the U.S. should also insist on thorough pre-boarding security measures including, if need be, individual searches of individuals and luggage. These measures, while aimed largely at protecting Americans, will protect citizens from other nations as well. When a plane is hijacked all its passengers are in danger, not just Americans.